

MEDIA, INFORMATION, AND THEN ?

A Paper Delivered at the :
"Educational Communication Centers and The Television Arts" Conference
November 22, 1974
S U N Y A
University Center at Albany
by
Gerd Stern

As a practicing artist, the relationship with media, from my first profession in poetry, script and print, through multi-media and television, has been as a means of expression. From a hands (and head) on point of view Marshall McLuhan's perceptions concerning media tools and technology as extensions of man's organism, served as focusing plane for a body of work.

Two instances of such percepts: - the first having to do with the analysis of particular characteristics of media tools as they condition and control expression. I think of that generation of "underground" films which were made after the advent of the Bolex reflex 16mm camera incorporating wind-back as well as single-frame and zoom features, the paramount influence of Kodak's Carousel projector with its 81 increment program, Sony's portapack and recently Polaroid's SX-70. My second instance concerns the ability to work with patterns of effect as against immersion in the detail of content. These instances are typical of a genre

2. MEDIA, INFORMATION, AND THEN ?

of misunderstood and misapplied insights into contemporary technology. Misunderstood, partially because they were received a priori as theories to be put into practice, whereas they are actually posteriori diagnostic, critical observations, available for philosophic guidance. Misapplied, particularly in that second instance, by enthusiastic practitioners who reduced the content/effect relationship to absurd extremes, working with content chosen at subjective random, (as discriminated from objective randomness a la John Cage) and without contextual regard, saying in effect, "the medium is the message and the content of the message is gratuitous," a considerable deflection from McLuhan's own focus.

However, some of these works of the sixties, and I immodestly include in that category our USCO multi-media pieces of the period, such as Hubbub and We Are All One, as well as work by Ken Dewey's Action Theatre, Carolee Schneemann, Alan Kaprow, the Once Group et al, were avowedly experimental and investigated such effects as audience overload, multi-channel interaction, associative potential - the "aha" syndrome, implicitly asking open-ended questions concerning the presentation of information. In the meantime, information, heretofore a relatively innocuous commodity of fact, became a technocratic mystique, complete with a roster of new occupations and an identity as a major industry and an academic discipline. This new capability to handle and

3. MEDIA, INFORMATION, AND THEN ?

manage information qua, that is to assemble, store, index, retrieve and perform programmed operations on bits of electromagnetically coded data, is still revolutionizing our ways of life and, particularly, of work. Complex, elegant concepts came first, dealing with the nature of signal and noise relationships, feedback loops, entropy, information theory and cybernetics with Norbert Wiener's promises of social benefit and his warnings concerning the misuse of new powers.

We are now told that our industrialized society will be replaced by an information society and that we are on the threshold of an economy where GNP, or whatever acronym then serves, will to a large extent be composed of process - the "soft" services of information dissemination and utilization instead of the now primary distribution of "hard" product.

Whereas the old factual information was of academic interest to artists of past eras, current media artists, including those whose work you have seen at this conference, processing software for television and other state-of-the-art hardware systems, perceive and work directly with information as their materials. Understood as a matrix of dynamic interacting variables macroscopic information environments are programmable. On a non-visible, nor audible level energy quanta of information are comprehensible and programmable in massed symbolic simultaneous and sequential displays. The ideas of order framed by creative mind in digital array or tuned by hand in analog, evidence those same drives which have

4. MEDIA, INFORMATION, AND THEN ?

sophisticated man's extensions from tool handle, through gear and lever, control of mechanical force, switching of power, tuning of energy. And then?

Then is a word which points bi-valent to past or future, bearing no presence except as spoken or written symbol, an indicator of man's temporal state, historic and prophetic. Then, is question and promise, questioning beliefs based in media and information of the past, questioning the capabilities of our arts to future - to express in work the definitions and limits of our present technology, positioning the artist-maker beyond its constraints. Promising then, time immanent, the transcendent suspension of belief in media and information, that ordinary and necessary condition for the practice of art in life.